**Trish Walsh**

**Reflective Essay**

**Working with Diverse Families & Communities**

**June 30, 2008**

Working with Diverse Families & Communities was the fourth course in the Tier 1 Preliminary Administrative Credential program at the Orange County Department of Education. We worked with facilitator Gail Anderson from OCDE. Additionally, we spent an evening with Dr. Juan Carlos Araque of the United Way and a day with Judy Iverson, focusing on Dr. Ruby Payne’s workshop on poverty. It was an eye-opening course, as my teaching experiences have been fairly limited to predominantly white, middle and upper-middle class, English-speaking families. We focused on both cultural and monetary diversity. Working with the community also includes working with myriad businesses and other resources in the school area. As administrators, we must understand our community and be able to work with them effectively.

First, we talked about involving all the diverse cultures to participate in the school. An aspect of an administrator’s job is to involve all members of the school and surrounding community. Thomas Hatch’s article expressed how involving the community leads to better student achievement. His examples were parent communication leading to academic achievement in a middle school and safety improvement leading to academic achievement in an elementary school. He noted the important differences were physical conditions and resources, attitudes and quality learning experiences enhancing education. As educational leaders, we must care for our school holistically. Another article by Arnold Fege made the point that involving parents through fundraising and volunteering alone is not enough. We must see parents as our partners. They are really the customer, or consumer, of education. Parent conferences are a given, so we need to foster relationships with parents in other ways, too. Some families involve themselves regardless, so we need to work on reaching out to those who do not typically get involved. We can make a big impact with those families. On top of everything else, we have to be in the business of outreach. Fege provides a great list of ideas for how to successfully reform our schools to foster more parent involvement The School Accountability Report Card (SARC) is required of each school and disseminates all-encompassing information about the school. Sharing that with families sums things up. Simple things like the school website and emails are a great start, but we must be mindful that not everyone has access to technology and take the proper steps to disseminate the information to them as well.

Next, we concentrated on learning how to work with cultural groups with language barriers. We can use the SARC to gain insight to our population if we are new to an area. Aside from the SARC, a needs survey would be beneficial to help understand the needs of the families in order to adapt. One of the most impactful resources presented to us by Dr. Araque was the Ten Education Commandments for Parents. I loved how simply the big picture of education was stated. This United Way publication was presented in both English & Spanish in cartoon strip form. It was accessible to and understandable by all people. The message was that parents have responsibilities regarding their child’s education. It was not overwhelming or overbearing, so it should help bridge a gap and leave a lasting feel-good message with all families. With typical barriers in mind, we had to work together to create a presentation that could be used as staff development with an elementary, middle or high school staff. Myself, Dena and Carrie created staff development that would help our teachers focus on three things: parent conferences, family fun nights and class involvement. We would be sure to share the Ten Education Commandments, learning strategies and information regarding health and public access at conference time. We would share the importance of fun family involvement with the staff and work to create a night of games and community resources right on school grounds. Finally, together we would incorporate parent involvement with curricular areas of school: Read Across America, Jump for Heart, career day, science experiments and science fair, reading week, reading partners, social studies projects, field trips and other educational activities. Our presentation was succinct and to the point of parent involvement, across all cultural lines. Regardless of language spoken, parents are our partners.

Lastly, the remainder of the course focused on understanding poverty through the lens of Dr. Ruby Payne. Our certified trainer helped us shed light on our own preconceived notions of poverty and helped us see that, in general, school run based on middle class norms and values. Those may not be applicable or important to all walks of life. We took a Cultural Competency self-assessment. I scored a 3.29 average, which was probably middle of the road. We assessed our schools, and ourselves ranking from destructiveness – incapacity – blindness – precompetence – competence – proficiency. I felt that my school was somewhere near blindness and precompetence, and I had to think of strategies that could move us toward proficiency. Schools go through phases to get them to grow toward proficiency. Schools and staff have the best intention to work through these phases to improve, but we have to acknowledge there are always obstacles to growth as well. An educational leader needs to be able to lead her staff through the phases of growth and help over come obstacles that arise. We read an article by Bonnie Benard on “Fostering Resiliency in Kids.” The attributes of a resilient kid are: social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose and future. I believe I can help influence kids to be resilient in my work as a classroom teacher, and I believe I can help influence kids to be resilient in a whole school as well. I need to always be mindful to connect to kids every day, both personally and academically and give them as much encouragement as possible. As a principal, I need to be present, visible and interacting with kids and parents every day.

During the Ruby Payne portion of the course, we looked closely at the causes of poverty and how to understand the hidden rules of poverty. On thing that really stood out was the concept of having two sets of rules – ones that they follow at home and ones that they follow at school. This can help students be more successful, regardless of home circumstances. Many kids living in poverty lack resources that lead to well being. We must acknowledge what they lack and try to provide information on how to access resources or provide the resources ourselves, the best we can. I really enjoyed looking at the “hidden rules” – basic topics – through the lenses of poverty, middle class and wealthy perspectives. It helps us coming from one walk of life to work thoughtfully with those from other walks of life. There are little things, like tone of voice, noise level, personal connections and certain words, which can make a big difference in getting children from poverty to work with you in the classroom. The discipline tips and behavior analysis will be beneficial to me in working with diverse populations in a classroom or school or district.

Standard 4 states that a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources. I learned that, in relation to standard 4.1, it is my duty to elicit and incorporate the perspectives of my families and community members. I must involve them in planning, through use of their input on School Site Council and English Learners Advisory Committee (ELAC). I must ensure quality and fairness in all aspects of our school life and ensure that high standards are maintained by all, focusing on the Ten Educational Commandments. I need to ask for feedback and act on it properly with a yearly survey and other surveys on specific activities and decisions. I must also maintain consistent, accessible lines of communication with families and the community. Websites make that so simple in many ways, but I must be mindful of whom I am communicating with and what method of communication will actually reach them effectively. I will have to take communication to whatever level is needed of the people I am trying to reach in a positive manner. We can get things printed in whatever language other than English that our families require. In relation to standard 4.2, I learned that it is up to me to establish and maintain community partnerships and network to bring whatever resources I can to my school site. I am an educational leader at my school, within my district and in the larger community. It is my charge to provide whatever I can to benefit my students, staff and families. Working with local banks, stores and restaurants, we can work on getting special awards, privileges or other benefits for our kids and families. I can also elicit input and get ideas from networking with similar schools in the area, state or country. I want to do what I can to let the community know what a great job our school is doing and about our constant drive toward success, even with press releases or other community bulletins for the public in general. In this technology age, our website would provide a base of information for our school, but other tools of communication would be used to reach a diverse range of people. I am an advocate for my students and families, and with standard 4.3, I learned it is up to me to engage community service agencies in the school. I need to provide a wealth of information for my families and help make connections for those in need. I know more now about the United Way and other community groups, thanks to Dr. Araque; I could help get people the outside support they need to be successful in life so they can be more successful with their family’s education. As educators, we know the importance of healthy childhood development and the necessity of the “basic needs” like food, clothing, shelter, and safety needs. We must be sure that our students’ needs are met, or we cannot possibly meet their educational needs.

As a school leader, I would remain consistently on top of my population, using demographic information and insight from the community. I would be sure to have people I could use as translators if necessary, and I would have important school information in other languages or readily translatable to other languages. I would also provide information to the community regarding English education. The ELAC at my school would be interconnected to my School Site Council so all diverse groups would be represented in decision making. I would be sure to understand the values of my school population and work on reaching them in a way that makes sense to everyone. Maintaining communication with my community is essential. Through a school website, weekly letters home, Back to School Night and Open House, I would maintain an open relationship with families. I would want families to feel comfortable coming to school, so we would host fun events like a Family Fun Night and welcoming monthly flag assemblies. I would distribute timely surveys regarding our school and use the feedback to inform decision making, validating the perspectives of our “customers.” I would keep involved with the community through partnering with resources, like local police and the Skills and Assets for Excellence (SAFE) program and local grocery stores and their community partner cards. I would work to tap into resources in the area through fundraisers for various school and student needs and through the local community center for student and family activities. I would embrace diverse families and communities for all our benefit.